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ABSTRACT

The linguistic situation in the Arabic-speaking world is briefly described, and variation and the factors that cause it are discussed. By reviewing the history of the literary language, it is shown that there exist no native speakers of the literary language, Modern Standard Arabic. The relaity is, rather, a classic case of diglossia. This reality has direct bearing upon which languages should be taught and by what methods. The choice of language is dependent on the goals of the student. When the student intends to learn both a colloquial variety and Modern Standard, the order in which the languages are learned must be considered. This was the point of the study undertaken at the University of Arizona in 1969. Twelve of the 25 subjects, students and staff members of the University of Arizona Environmental Research Laboratory, followed a year's course in Gulf Arabic on the Arizona campus, then went on to a year's course in Modern Standard. The remaining subjects, for the most part professionals, followed a year's course in Modern Standard, and then went on to Gulf Arabic. Results indicate that the students who began their studies with Gulf Arabic were more successful academically and consequently displayed a higher level of motivation. (CLK)

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FROM GULF ARABIC INTO MODERN STANDARD ARABIC:

A PILOT STUDY*

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I. Introduction

Arabic today is spoken by more than one hundred million people, the majority of whom are concentrated in an area roughly bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, the Sahara Desert, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Arabian Gulf. Within this Arabic-speaking world there is considerable diversity of dialects. Despite differences in phonology, morphology, and to a lesser degree syntax, there does exist a degree of mutual intelligibility among most of these dialects. Strictly speaking, we cannot refer to the dialect of a specific country or town, for there is a great deal of regional variation; hence we speak of dialects and idiolects. In addition to this regional variation there is also variation relatable to the socioeconomic, educational, and religious status of the speakers. This is a language situation which is not unique only to Arabic. It can be found in any language spoken over a large area for a long period of time. In Arabic, however, this language situation is further complicated by the fact that the written or the literary language is a superimposed dialect regarded by all speakers as the exemplary or the ideal.

The history of this superimposed literary language can be divided into three periods: (1) classical Arabic, spanning approximately from the Sixth through the Eighth Centuries, characterized by a predominating

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[1] For an extensive introduction to this literary language, cf. "ʿarabiyya," Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., pp. 561-574.

ED109881

influence of Arabs themselves (politically and culturally, including the literary output), and most notably including pre-Islamic poetry, the Qur'an, and the early Islamic literature; (2) Medieval Arabic, continuing up through much of the Nineteenth Century, characterized by a codified grammar and the predominating influence of non-Arab writers, and culminating in a long period of declining social and political importance; and (3) Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)[2], reflecting a renaissance in Arab self-consciousness and certain very notable trends toward breaking with the traditional forms and ideals. However, despite the differences between the written Arabic of these three periods - - - differences seen most obviously in vocabulary and style - - - there are strong bonds of continuity, especially in morphology and syntax, with the Qur'an still considered the peak of perfection.

Thus, in the Arab world today, MSA has no native speakers; it is rather specialized in function as the vehicle of literary expression within Arab society; it carries considerable prestige as the modern counterpart of a highly esteemed literary language of thirteen centuries' duration, and has had a long history of painstaking, thorough grammatical study. Moreover, it contains a number of grammatical categories not present in the colloquials (e.g., case inflections and dual forms for pronouns and verbs, etc.), but does share a large segment of vocabulary with them. This situation thus presents a classical case of 'diglossia'[3]:

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[2]Other names currently in use are 'Modern Written Arabic', 'Contemporary Standard Arabic', 'Modern Literary Arabic', 'Formal Arabic', etc. The name abbreviated MSA, however, is intended to represent the language both written and spoken on formal and less formal occasions. . . speeches, discussions, debates, news broadcasts, and in schools and universities, being the medium of instruction.

[3] Charles A. Ferguson, 'Diglossia', Word 15 (1959), p. 336.

> Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes, but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

This being the case, the question may fairly be asked: Why not study just MSA? Before answering this question we should take into consideration the objectives of the student of Modern Standard Arabic or a colloquial dialect of Arabic. If one's objectives are limited to reading Arabic books, magazines, journals and understanding the news media, then (by all means) one should study only MSA. But, on the other hand, if one's objectives include residing, studying, working, or doing research in a particular area of the Arab world, then competence in MSA is not sufficient. Moreover, if, however, one uses MSA as a means of oral communication, the chances are that he will be understood with varying degrees of difficulty by speakers of urban dialects, but that he will sound pedantic and stilted. Strictly speaking, MSA is not used even by highly educated speakers in daily speech. Furthermore, MSA is learned by Arab children in school only after acquisition of a dialect. It is true that educated Arabs borrow freely from MSA when discussing academic, political, economic, or other formal matters, but the result is what is sometimes referred to as a "mixed" or "in-between" language of which many examples can be found in any language text of a colloquial variety of Arabic.

Let us consider for a moment Arabic language offerings in American colleges and universities. Most major universities have well-established programs for written Arabic, which have different labels but often mean

the same thing. The names in current use are: 'Modern Standard Arabic', 'Classical Arabic', 'Modern Written Arabic', 'Modern Literary Arabic', 'Contemporary Arabic', or simply 'Arabic'. Realizing the need for the use of the language as an oral communicative tool, some institutions have recently enriched their Arabic language offerings by the addition of 'Colloquial' or 'Spoken Arabic'. Among these institutions are the University of Michigan, the University of Texas, Georgetown University, the University of Utah, Portland State University, and the University of Arizona, to mention a few. These offerings in the colloquial dialects are generally a one-year or a two-year course in colloquial Egyptian, Levantine, Gulf, Tunisian, Moroccan, or Iraqi Arabic. In most of these institutions students learn a colloquial dialect only after they have studied MSA for a year or two. The reverse procedure, i.e., moving from a colloquial dialect to MSA, has not been experimented with on a wide scale, except at Defense Language Institutes here and abroad. It should be pointed out that a number of institutions of higher learning do not have any offerings in the colloquials. The reason for the lack of scientific experimentation with regard to the movement from a colloquial dialect into MSA and the absence of offerings in the colloquials is not due to the fact that the ultimate objective of students is the use of the language as a tool for research. The majority of Arabic studies majors want to use Arabic as a means of oral communication, because they have Arab friends, or they plan to reside in the Arab countries, or they want to go back to the Arab countries and enjoy better communication with the people.

II. The Study

At the University of Arizona in Tucson and at the University of Arizona Arid Lands Research Center in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., this researcher has been experimenting with the transition from Gulf Arabic (GA) to MSA and vice versa for the last three years. In the fall of 1969 two sections of students (a total of 25 students) were selected for the present study. The students were assigned by a process of odd and even numbers to either a Gulf Arabic[4] class or an MSA[5] class. The students in both sections knew no Arabic at all. The Gulf Arabic group studied Arabic for one year and then moved to MSA for an additional year. The MSA class studied MSA for one year and then moved to Gulf Arabic for an additional year. In Tucson seven out of the twelve students in the GA class were staff members of the University of Arizona Environmental Research Laboratory; the other five were regular students majoring in Middle Eastern Studies. The MSA students were regular students majoring in Middle Eastern and other studies at the University. In Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., the majority of the students were bank managers, oil company employees, engineers, airline officials, and government consultants. All classes were conducted on a daily basis with two forty-minute instructional periods each day and two one-half hour laboratory sessions.

The Gulf Arabic class used Qafisheh, Hamdi A. Basic Gulf Arabic, based on Colloquial Abu Dhabi Arabic (University of Arizona Environmental

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[4] A Gulf Arabic class or group in this study is used to indicate a class whose first exposure to Arabic for the first year was Gulf Arabic and then moved to MSA for an additional year.

[5] An MSA class is one that first studied MSA for one year and then moved to Gulf Arabic for an additional year.

Research Laboratory, Tucson, 1970) for the first year. Each lesson in the text is based on a dialog which the students memorize by mimicry-memorization with the informant or the tape providing the model. After the dialogs have been assimilated by the students, pattern drills are used to drill the structural concepts found in the dialogs. An aural comprehension passage re-combining previously studied vocabulary and structures is included at the end of every two units. The drills do not aim at non-thoughtful responses. Abboud, et. al., Elementary Modern Standard Arabic (Inter-University Committee, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1968) was used in the second year with the same methods and techniques. Contextual practice rather than pattern practice was stressed in both texts. The MSA groups used both texts with the same methods and techniques.

III. Results

1. The MSA students found the first six weeks of the course cumbersome and dull. From the very start they had to struggle with the mechanics of reading and writing. To them this was a passive silent skill, especially at the initial stages. They had to read and write words the meanings of which they did not know. Retention was low and there was a high drop-out rate. The GA students, on the other hand, were very highly motivated; they were reading and writing meaningful words and phrases. Reading to them was something like a great discovery, and writing strengthened their grip on the spoken word. It is well established in foreign language learning that the more meaningful the material to be learned, the greater the facility in learning and retention. Consequently, the drop-out rate was lower and retention was higher.

2. The GA group made significantly better progress in listening and understanding and were not far behind the other groups in tests of straight reading and writing. The GA groups were slightly ahead in speaking ability, presumably because of their early start.

3. The MSA groups were slightly better in writing ability initially. In terms of spelling they were highly analytical and had a tendency to dissect words. Words to them were made up of a combination of sounds put together. To the GA students a word was the Gestalt. It was as though they had been trained in the whole word approach or the look-and-say method and the MSA students in the phonics method. Initially, then, the GA students were poorer spellers, but differences in spelling achievement tended to disappear as the stress was changed in the succeeding semesters, and students do adjust in varying degrees to different emphasis in continuing courses.

4. As a corollary to number 3 above, the MSA students initially were slower but slightly better readers; the others were faster but less cautious readers. This problem of the lack of caution totally disappeared in the second semester.

5. After the GA students had mastered the mechanics of reading and writing, they were able to read and write words and construct sentences by themselves, e.g., if they wrote darasa 'he studied', they would try to write or at least ask about the writing of other words to which they had been exposed orally, such as darrasa 'he taught', mudarris 'instructor', madrasa 'school', dars 'lesson', duruus 'lessons', etc. Motivation was a significant factor.

6. While it took the MSA students five weeks to master the mechanics of reading and writing, it took the GA groups three weeks. In terms of vocabulary and grammar, the GA students had a vocabulary knowledge of about 1,500 items and knew the basic grammatical structures by the end of the first year. The MSA students covered only the first 38 lessons of EMSA (a vocabulary knowledge of about 600 items and exposure to some basic sentence types). By the end of the second year the GA students finished EMSA and the first half of IMSA. The MSA students finished the GA course and the EMSA (Lessons 39-55) text.

7. Finally, the GA students started developing a feel for the language and the culture of the people whose language they were studying from the initial stages. There were no lectures on culture, but the dialogs and texts they studied were constructed in such a way as to throw light on cultural patterns of behavior and different ways of life. This influenced their motivation and their capacity to learn the foreign language. To the MSA students learning Arabic was identifying it with its dictionary throughout the first year.

IV. Summary and Conclusion

There were two methods being compared in this study, the movement from a colloquial dialect (in this case GA) to MSA and vice versa. The results of this study favored the former method. The significant differences in favor of the GA students were higher motivation, higher retention, lower drop-out rate, and more material coverage. The GA students were faster, but less accurate readers, and consequently, poorer spellers. The MSA students were slower, but better readers and spellers. These differences between the two groups tended to disappear by the end of the second year.

On the basis of obtained results this study suggests various questions which need to be examined more fully:

1. Are the results obtained in this study stable or will differences and tendencies disappear by the end of the second year or the beginning of the third year?

2. Regardless of the small number of cases, are the results obtained with these two groups of students generalizeable to students at other age levels?

3. Would the results have been different if the two groups had been exposed to different methods of presentation, e.g., inductive vs. deductive, audio-lingual vs. code-learning, etc.?

4. For this type of study, should students' assignment to sections be random or based on information gathered concerning each student's prior knowledge or exposure to other exotic or non-exotic foreign languages, and his sense of modality preference in learning?

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